

Air Force Strategy:  
Sovereign Options for  
Securing Global Stability and Prosperity

Introduction

*The mission of the United States Air Force is to deliver sovereign options for the defense of the United States of America and its global interests—to fly, fight, and win in Air, Space, and Cyberspace.*

Today the United States stands at a strategic crossroads. This junction is characterized by rapid growth of the global economy accompanied by diffusion of technology, new and increasingly complex economic and international relationships, and potential competition for resources and influence. This strategic context demands that we retain our position of international political and military leadership because security and economic health closely intertwine with international political stability and economic prosperity. We are the leader in a global system predicated on stable, peaceful relations among nations. We prosper in large measure because we are part of a system of mutually beneficial exchanges between states.

Following World War II, the United States played the leading role in creating, preserving, and protecting this international system as the community of free democratic nations grew. This leadership led in large part to the fall of the Soviet regime and provided the stable backdrop against which countries like Japan, India, and China initiated their unprecedented economic growth. Absent the relative long-term stability of the global environment facilitated by American diplomacy and underwritten by the strength of our armed forces, neither the international system, nor the United States would enjoy its current level of security and prosperity. We cannot abdicate our position of political and military leadership without grave consequences.

Challenges

Liberty, stability, and prosperity are far from guaranteed. We must continue to defend them from a position of strength. Numerous actors ranging from rising major powers to global terrorist groups have the capability and desire to disrupt the existing system to achieve their own ends. Peaceful nations must contend with these actors in order to preserve liberty and freedom. Three broad threats challenge stability over the coming decades: radical extremists espousing terror; “rejectionist” states who seek to overthrow the existing political and economic structures; and regional powers and rising peers who will likely compete with us for global access and influence. Our national security demands that the military

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protect the United States against external attacks and aggression; prevent conflict and surprise attack; and prevail against adversaries.<sup>1</sup>

The most dangerous threats the US faces come from radical extremists with access to modern conventional and nuclear weapons with their unrivaled capacity for destruction. These groups present a clear and present threat to our citizens on our own soil and cannot be allowed to attack our homeland. The vicious attacks on Sept 11, 2001 clearly demonstrated the intentions of extremists to strike at the United States as destructively as possible, and their subsequent and continuing efforts to obtain Weapons of Mass Destruction powerfully reinforce that reality. The 9/11 attacks were the catalysts for our global effort to defeat radical extremist and negate their terror strategy. This will likely be an extended struggle. The attacks by Al Qaeda remind us that above all, the US military must prevent such opponents from benefiting from attacks against our citizens and America's vital interests at home or abroad.

By contrast, the most likely threats come from rejectionist states. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the most common challenge our nation has faced is the asymmetric strategy of protracted conflict aimed at attrition and exhaustion that accomplishes an adversary's objectives while avoiding a full military response from the United States. Recent examples of this type of strategy include Serbia's ethnic cleansing programs in Kosovo; Iran and other states' illicit pursuit of nuclear weapons; and the willingness of the Taliban regime to offer sanctuary to terrorists. A sound counter-strategy demands that our armed forces be able to reach into the areas of the world where these threats persist with scalable and innovative options that dissuade our adversaries from embarking on this kind of strategy.

Our problems are further exacerbated because these two types of opponents are free to choose dispersed locations and types of conflicts suited to their tactical and operational strengths. Al Qaeda's sporadic terror attacks on American targets (embassies in Africa, deployed forces at Khobar Towers, the USS Cole, and twice against the World Trade Center) are examples of the enemy leveraging the tools of terror and surprise. Iraqi and Afghan rebels' use of roadside explosive devices, suicide bombers, and small-group terror tactics in ongoing conflicts are further examples of enemies choosing the type of conflict to suit their own strengths. This type of strategy allows opponents to systematically erode international stability while presenting significant challenges to US military capability and political will. Over the long term, these strategies reduce the United States' deterrence against stronger opponents looming on the horizon by wearing down our military capability and diminishing our credibility.

Finally, the most difficult challenges are likely to involve rising technological and economic peers that will compete for influence and access to resources around the globe. While we will not likely face a peer in military conflict in the near future,

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<sup>1</sup> National Military Strategy, 2004. viii.

the consequences of losing such a conflict would be severe. We must never lose our focus on deterring potential peer adversaries from using military threats to narrow our diplomatic options, nor from embarking on militarily risky courses of action. The rapid development and proliferation of high-technology weapons combined with innovative operational concepts are likely to make this particularly challenging, since power balances will be constantly changing and the risks of misperception may be high. Therefore, maintaining deterrence will require a sophisticated, competitive strategy that assures the required military capabilities for today and the sustainable, affordable investments for the future.

Given this spectrum of threats, the United States must field an Air Force capable of assuring our allies, dissuading and deterring potential adversaries, and if necessary, defeating those who choose to become our enemies.

### The Role of the US Military

It is always better to win without having to fight. Today, the US military does this by shaping the international environment with the potent tools of assurance, deterrence, and dissuasion. The principal role of the US military is to defend our Nation and our national interests. In this role, we assure our allies that they need not bow to violent threats as we deter or dissuade potential adversaries with overwhelming capabilities plainly linked to the national will. Our armed services accomplish this role by providing a solid foundation of military strength to complement the tools of peaceful diplomacy. None of these tools alone can sustain our position of international political and economic influence. We must be prepared to use all the instruments of national power in proper combination, in an integrated manner, to address potential threats to our nation and our interests.

### Air Force Strategic Concept: Sovereign Options

In response to current and emerging threats, the US Air Force has implemented a strategy based on providing US policy makers with *sovereign options* for our defense. *Sovereign options* refer to the spectrum of choices that air, space, and cyberspace capabilities offer US policy makers for solving problems. In peacetime, these options include, supporting our international partners, counterbalancing and containing aggressive states; signaling opponents of our commitment to protect our interests; and providing humanitarian aid--to both our allies and potentially hostile populations--to assure them of friendly US intentions. In war, Air Force capabilities provide decision makers with a range of options, from supporting joint and coalition actions in conjunction with allied land and sea forces to direct strikes against enemy centers of gravity to accomplish strategic outcomes. These options provide the country with credible and scalable counters to the full range of potential enemy actions and support our goals for assurance, deterrence, and dissuasion.

*Sovereign options* also refer to the asymmetric advantage the United States possesses in air and space technology and the way its ability to dominate air, space, and cyberspace multiplies the power of all US and coalition forces. With its present technology and operational concepts, the US dominates space and is able to gain air superiority against enemy air forces and air defense systems. Air and space dominance is the key to our ability to control the ground and maritime domains as well. In recent years, US air and space dominance coupled with precision weapons has transformed the way the United States fights, allowing joint and coalition forces rapid dominance of adversary actions and unprecedented freedom of action in the modern battlespace.

Even more than the ability to win wars, *sovereign options* refer to our strategic flexibility in determining when, how, and where to engage an enemy. War is not a matter of convenience. When war is thrust upon us, we must have the strategic depth to shape the conditions of conflict. From 1991 to 2003, the use of no-fly zones allowed the US to contain the aggressive actions of Saddam Hussein. When drawn into open conflict, the determined use of air power as part of the joint team crushed Iraq's conventional armies. A similar fate met the forces of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. When air power—working with Special Forces and indigenous Northern Alliance forces—defeated the Taliban in 2001, we disrupted Osama bin Laden's plan to operate his global terrorist network from the relative sanctuary of the Afghan frontier. In the insurgencies that followed both of these operations, air, space, and cyber power continued to prevent insurgents from massing into guerrilla armies, diminishing their power, and buying friendly forces time to establish stability.

The Air Force's ability to be simultaneously dominant in air, space, and cyberspace, has formed the foundation from which we provide *sovereign options* to policy makers. Our ability to operate across these domains and control our adversaries in each allows the Air Force to multiply the power of joint and coalition forces or to act alone to achieve national objectives. Our Air Force combines our capability in the domains of air, space and cyberspace to deliver Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power to the joint force.

***Global Vigilance:*** The ability to gain and maintain awareness of any entity, anywhere in the world to collect information about an adversary's intentions, opportunities, capabilities, or vulnerabilities, to fuse this information with data received from other entities, and to route relevant information to the joint force or national policy makers.

***Global Reach:*** The ability to project military capability responsively and advantageously without regard for range to any point on or above the earth, and provide mobility to rapidly supply, position, or reposition joint forces for any purpose or mission.

***Global Power:*** The ability to hold at risk any target anywhere in the world,

assert national sovereignty, safeguard joint freedom of action, and achieve decisive effects, kinetic or non-kinetic.

The ability to control operations across the domains of air, space, and cyberspace vastly magnifies the military power of US and coalition forces. A force of Airmen, trained and equipped to exploit the advantages of advanced air, space, and cyberspace technologies represents a national security treasure. They produce the strategic reach and power to exploit our control across the domains and extend our ability to deter, and, if necessary, defeat our adversaries. The US Air Force's ability to project power to assure friends and dissuade, deter, or defeat foes is America's asymmetric advantage.

### Implementing the Strategy

The Air Force currently provides joint and coalition forces with a bridge to the rest of the world and dominance on the conventional battlefield. This hard-won capability to dominate air and space has existed for less than twenty years and will only persist into coming decades if carefully nurtured.

The Air Force provides air and space dominance to joint forces today because, at this time, we enjoy a lead over our opponents. In war, even small technological and tactical advantages can mean the difference between victory and defeat. In the Vietnam War, our aircraft and concepts of operation were meant for a different kind of war, and, as a consequence, were inadequate to keep from losing 2,255 tactical aircraft and bombers.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Israeli air force, overwhelmingly superior in the 1967 Mideast War, suffered catastrophic losses just six years later when its leadership overestimated its ability to dominate battlespace when the capabilities of ground-based air defenses were increasing rapidly... as they are now. These examples show how rapidly superiority can become parity and dwindle into inferiority, if we are not vigilant and diligent in responding to our adversaries' efforts.

Today, opponents are studying our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and are rapidly developing counters to aging US air and space superiority technology. In coming years our advantage will significantly diminish if we do not keep pace by fielding new fifth-generation fighters, bombers, and satellites in sufficient numbers to counter the development of advanced anti-air and anti-space technologies and the inevitable export of those capabilities to potentially hostile states and non-state actors. We must provide our Airmen with the most exceptional tools for battle in order to sustain a durable and credible deterrent against our adversaries.

Equally worrisome is the rapidly shrinking aerospace industrial base. Our

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<sup>2</sup> Correll, John T. "The Vietnam War Almanac", AIR FORCE Magazine, September 2004, with attribution to USAF Operations Report, 30 November 1973, p. 57

strength and ability to capitalize on advances in air and space technologies is due in large part to America's vibrant and diverse aerospace industry. This asymmetric advantage has deteriorated over the last decade. Production lines have been irrevocably closed, skilled workforces have aged or retired, and companies have shut their doors. The US aerospace industry is rapidly approaching a point of no return. As Air Force assets wear out, the United States is losing the ability to build new ones. We must reverse this erosion through increased investment in such aircraft as the F-22 and the F-35.

Beyond advantages in technology and operational concepts, America's commitment abroad requires an expeditionary Air Force that can engage forward in peacetime and fight forward in wartime. While long-range bombers and missiles offer a capability that serves as an ultimate guarantor of US security and power, expeditionary presence is the face of US deterrence and the indispensable source of local and regional assurance, deterrence, and, ultimately, *sovereign options*. The Air Force must have sufficient resources and capability to continue to maintain a sustainable rotational base. We must retain sufficient manpower and force structure to project forward influence. The mechanism for doing this is the *air and space expeditionary construct* that provides joint force commanders with a trained and ready air, space, and cyber force to execute their plans. Our forward influence flows from permanent and expeditionary basing and serves to assure our allies of our commitment while deterring our adversaries from threatening our national interests.

The Air Force can provide global vigilance, reach and power only so long as it possesses robust global strike; space; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); missile defense; special operations; and air mobility capabilities. Particularly important in this regard are Air Force cyber capabilities. Today, electronic communications constitute and connect all joint and coalition capabilities. In an information age, this network allows us to find our opponents, process the information, route it to where it is needed, and guide our munitions to their targets. Increasingly, our enemies also depend on cyber systems. The Air Force utilizes space and cyberspace more than any other service to deliver strategic effects. Exploiting cyberspace vastly increases our capabilities, but also presents a potential vulnerability which our adversaries could exploit. Safeguarding our own cyber capabilities while engaging and disrupting the use and purpose of our opponents' capabilities is becoming the core of modern warfare.

### Force Requirements

If the Air Force is to play its crucial role, we must develop and maintain technological leads in the areas of air superiority fighters and penetrating, long-range reconnaissance and strike to hold at risk targets around the world. We must also field sufficient strike and full-spectrum mobility assets to assure battlespace dominance for the joint team. We must continue to treat space as an

operational domain by creating architectures and systems that allow us to provide the appropriate situational awareness and communications capability, giving strategic and tactical advantage to leadership at all levels. We must design and develop a force structure to operate in cyberspace to our benefit while holding adversaries at risk. To “provide for the common defense” and allow our Nation and nations around the world to prosper, we must build an Air Force that meets the requirements of today’s Combatant Commanders while addressing the challenges their successors will face in the future.

## Conclusion

US security and prosperity are best assured when we orchestrate all the instruments of our national power to work with other states to promote a stable and prosperous international system. The Air Force directly contributes to US security by providing a unique array of *sovereign options* for decision makers. These options maximize our ability to assure friends and to dissuade and deter both small and large threats across the spectrum of operations. When opponents cannot be deterred, these options magnify the combat capability of joint and coalition forces and provide our leaders a variety of strategic alternatives. The Air Force provides the Nation with its most lethal and proven force for defeating enemies across the broad range of threats we face. By controlling air, space, and cyberspace, the Air Force provides the Nation with the capability to dominate not only these domains, but those of sea and land as well expanding the options available to our sister services. Implementing this strategy demands a focus on fielding a force of highly trained Airmen with an advantage in technology and a force structure sufficient to provide the assurance of US presence. So long as Airmen hold a significant operational and technical lead over potential opponents and the Air Force maintains its global presence, the Service will continue to provide the Nation with the means to lead the fight for global stability and prosperity--in turn, guaranteeing our own.

Our emphasis on assurance, deterrence, and dissuasion reflects the conviction that it is far better to convince potential adversaries to refrain from the use military force than to have to defeat them after they have initiated conflict. Our success will be measured by conflicts averted as well as conflicts fought and won.